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UNCLAS LILONGWE 000244

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: INDEPENDENTS STAND OUT AS PARLIAMENTARY CANDIDATES

REF: 03 LILONGWE 1202

1. (U) On the official roster of candidates contesting in the May 18 parliamentary elections, each parliamentary district generally has between 4 and 13 candidates, with a notable number of contestants registered as independents. The ruling United Democratic Front (UDF)/Alliance for Democracy (AFORD) coalition, the opposition Mgwirizano Coalition, Malawi Congress Party (MCP), and National Democratic Alliance (NDA) were the only parties able to field contestants nationally, but with heavy concentrations in their respective regions of main support. Many of the independent candidates are recent defectors from the ruling UDF. Most parliamentary districts have at least one female contestant.

COMMENT

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2. (SBU) Large numbers of independent candidates contesting in parliamentary elections is a new phenomenon for Malawi and is likely a result of discontent about the ways in which party primaries were run. While the presence of independents represents a new willingness by candidates to maneuver outside the generally machine-like operations of the political parties, it is uncertain that candidates contesting as independents, if successful, will remain unaffiliated, especially if their former party is voted into power. In most instances, the independents separated from their parties after losing a primary race, and they have no real grievances with their former party. (It is telling to note, however, that party discipline within the ruling UDF is eroding.) At any rate, Parliament after the May elections will be much more politically diverse than at present. At least seven parties are poised to win one or more seats in the House, and the creation and interplay of parliamentary coalitions will likely tax the National Assembly's ability to critically examine and pass legislation.

BROWNING